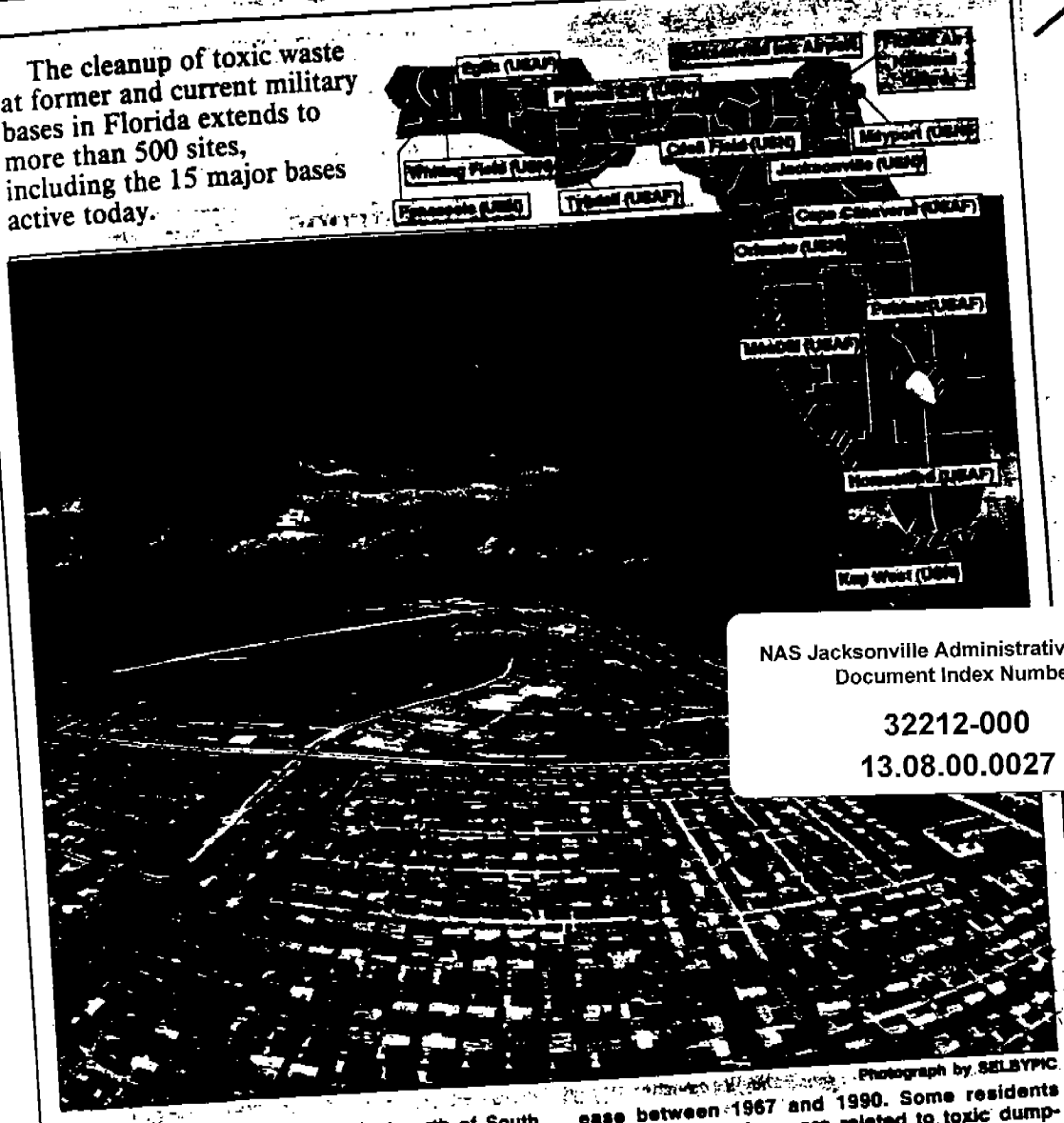
The cleanup of toxic waste at former and current military bases in Florida extends to more than 500 sites, including the 15 major bases active today.



Photograph by SELBYPIC

Patrick Air Force Base looms just north of South Patrick Shores. At least 10 people who have lived in South Patrick Shores contracted Hodgkin's Disease between 1967 and 1990. Some residents suspect the problems are related to toxic dumping at the neighboring air base.

By BOOTH GUNTER
Tribune Staff Writer

TAMPA

He grew up on a barrier island near Cape Canaveral, swimming and fishing in lagoons the U.S. Air Force now says are tainted with toxic metals from an abandoned military dump.

Then, at 25, Bill Latshaw lost a battle with Hodgkin's Disease, a rare cancer of the lymphatic system.

That was 1983. It wasn't until this summer when another Hodgkin's victim learned about toxic wastes at next-door Patrick Air Force Base that anyone started counting the cases in the neighborhood.

What state health officials found was this: No less than 10 people who had lived in South Patrick Shores contracted the disease between 1967 and 1990.

Although epidemiologists say it's unlikely, some residents suspect the disease is related to toxic-waste dumping at Patrick. The neighborhood, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, probably was built over an old military dumping ground.

If there is a dump under South Patrick Shores, it is just one of more than 500 suspected military waste sites in Florida — some known, some shrouded by time and palmettos.

Tribune photograph by SKIP O'ROURKE

The contaminated soil at MacDill Air Force Base's old fire training grounds has been replaced. A ground water recovery and treatment system has been installed.

In 1984, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) promised to purge more than 17,000 sites of the poisoned soil and water left by decades of environmental abuses during the Cold War.

But, increasingly, critics are asking: Is the military, which swept to such a swift and decisive victory in the Persian Gulf war, mobilizing fast enough in this conflict?

Although the DOD is investigating 529 possible pollution sites on 61 bases in Florida, only four of those sites have been cleaned up since the program began seven years ago, according to a Pentagon report published in February.

The bases still to be cleaned up include MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa and four that are on the federal Superfund list of the nation's dangerous hazardous waste dumps — Cecil Field Naval Air Station, Pensacola Naval Air Station, Jacksonville Naval Air Station and Homestead Air Force Base.

The story is the same across the nation.

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The military base cleanup

There are 529 suspected toxic waste sites being investigated or cleaned up at 61 active military installations in Florida.

Stages of cleanup	Complete	Under way
Preliminary assessment Records studied to identify possible waste sites.	512	17
Site investigation Initial sampling to determine whether toxins are present.	257	119
Remedial investigation In-depth study to determine risk to human health and environment.	39	165
Cleanup plan written	3	22
Cleanup complete	4	21

Source: Defense Environmental Restoration Program, annual report to Congress for fiscal year 1990, February 1991.

The Tampa Tribune-Times, Sunday, September 8, 1991

Cleanup stalled in 'study' phase

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Out of 17,482 possible waste sites at 1,855 installations, including 89 Superfund sites, fewer than 300 have been cleaned.

"There are a lot of sites where they're dragging their feet," said Lenny Siegel, a researcher for the Boston-based National Toxics Campaign Fund.

Siegel co-authored a study published in March that was critical of the cleanup program. He said the military continues to operate with little public input and that environmental cleanup is not a high priority at many bases.

"There are a lot of old-line soldiers who don't view environmental protection as one of their priority missions. You don't get a medal of honor for not polluting," Siegel said.

Pentagon officials disagree.

Kevin Doxey, director of the Defense Environmental Restoration Program, said the cleanup is a high priority with Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, and that emphasis filters down to the front lines.

"Although it's an oddity for the military mind-set, it's one [issue] that definitely has the secretary's attention," Doxey said. "We're training our senior leaders to be aware of environmental issues and develop an environmental ethic."

The fact that congressional appropriations for the cleanup have grown from $150 million in 1984 to $1.1 billion this year proves the military is serious about its environmental mission, he said.

Thus far, taxpayers have shelled out almost $4 billion, much of which went to private contractors to conduct studies of the contaminated sites.

Pentagon officials say another $30 billion will be needed to finish the job. That's $10 billion more than the nation spent to put a man on the moon in the 1960s Apollo program. Florida environmental officials estimate the cost to clean up state sites will be at least $200 million.

The program, similar in scope and complexity to the scandal-plagued federal Superfund program, is not without its own problems.

Last year, DOD investigators found the cleanup burdened by a cumbersome, fragmented bureaucracy. The report, written by the DOD inspector general's office, described the program as lacking direction and said there was little coordination among the military services and environmental agencies overseeing the cleanup.

A central Pentagon office sets overall policy for the program, but cleanup decisions and contracting are handled at each base.

The report warned that the program's technical complexity and heavy reliance on contractors made it highly susceptible to waste, mismanagement and inefficiency.

Doxey said many of the problems identified in the report have been ironed out.

But he acknowledged he is frustrated because the cleanup is moving so slowly. Part of the problem, he said, is the inability of state and federal environmental agencies to keep pace. The agencies must review environmental data and approve cleanup plans during each phase of a site investigation.

One environmental study can cost up to $1 million and take two or three years to complete, he said.

"I think one of the concerns we

do have is this constant stage of studying," Doxey said. "We have to get out of the study mode and get on with the cleanup."

Environmental officials say they're doing the best they can. "It's going to take years. We get a document in from EPA that's 1,500 pages; we can't review it overnight," said Eric Nuzie, the federal facilities coordinator for the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation.

Doxey said his biggest concern is what will happen in the mid-1990s, when cleanup plans have been devised for thousands of contaminated sites.

"There may not be enough firms to do all this work. If that's the case, we may have to choose which ones we want to do."

The military's goal, Doxey said, is for each site to be in the cleanup phase by the year 2000. In cases where groundwater contamination is widespread, the cleanup could last for years while the water is pumped from the ground and treated.

"The communities are concerned, and they should be," Doxey said. "We're concerned too. We want to get out of this business in 10 years."

The Corps of Engineers is working along parallel lines. The Corps is looking into possible pollution at 389 additional sites in Florida that the military once used for such things as landing strips or supply depots.

The list of sites reads like an index of World War II history in Florida: Alachua Army Air Field, Brooksville Army Air Field, Dunnellon Army Air Field, Hillsborough Army Air Field (also known as Henderson Field, in North Tampa east of Sulphur Springs), Pinellas Army Air Field, Williston Municipal Airport and Zephyrhills City Airport are among former bases in West Central Florida.

In addition to World War II training sites, Florida has been home to a string of missile tracking sites along both the east and west coasts, Army air defense sites in the Miami and Key West areas and Navy installations throughout the state.

Sometimes, pollution at the so-called formerly used defense sites, or FUDS, is discovered quite by accident.

In Sumter County, for instance, a couple who built their home on the site of an abandoned World War II Army airfield at Bushnell discovered aviation fuel in their well water in 1987.

The Defense Department took responsibility and drilled the couple a new, deeper well, and the state provided a filter to cleanse the water. But the contamination remains underground.

The task of cleaning up the toxic stew is staggering.

For decades, chemical wastes were dumped routinely in back lots and out-of-the-way corners on military bases in every state. Firing ranges were contaminated with chemicals used in explosives. Jet fuel leaked from underground tanks. Pesticides, dioxins, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), petroleum products, acids, industrial solvents and radioactive wastes were poured into the ground.

The dumps, found at virtually every military installation in the nation, contaminate underground water, threaten fragile aquatic ecosystems and endanger birds and other wildlife.

"Things that were normal practices years ago are illegal now," Nuzie said. "Consequently, all the bases have pro[illegible]

All of the 15 major Florida bases may end up on the Superfund list, he said.

At one of the nation's worst sites, the Jefferson Proving Ground in Indiana, military officials say they need at least $3 billion to rid a 100-square-mile area of unexploded ordnance, asbestos, toxic solvents, radioactive debris from anti-tank weapons, pesticides and other pollution.

Researcher Siegel said Congress must invest more money, more quickly.

"There's just no way they're going to get it done well and soon with the current funding," he said. "If you don't clean up now, it spreads. It gets worse."

At MacDill, jet fuel floats across acres of underground water, pollutants seep from at least five landfills and high levels of nitrates have appeared in test wells on a golf course. Cleanup, including treating ground water and burning contaminated soil, has begun at some sites, while others are still being investigated.

Al Austin, a Tampa developer who is chairman of a civic group that tried unsuccessfully to keep the F-16 fighter wing at MacDill, said Air Force officials assured him last week the base would be free of pollution by 1994. That's when the base's runway is scheduled to close and the last of the fighter jets will leave.

At Homestead Air Force Base near Miami, heavy metals and volatile organic compounds seep through soil and ground water near dumps used since the 1940s.

As late as 1984 at Homestead, federal Drug Enforcement Administration agents dumped ethyl ether, a toxic solvent, into the ground while burning drugs they had seized, according to a Defense Department report. Later tests showed the chemical had contaminated the ground water. Now it's a Superfund site.

Environmental officials say many of the hazardous waste sites pose little immediate threat to drinking water supplies.

"The Department of Defense has said we're now environmentally smart and we want to clean it up," said Capt. Ken Warren, a spokesman for Patrick. "Right now we're trying to find out the best, smartest way to do the cleanup."

Meanwhile, state health officials have sampled water wells in South Patrick Shores to check for toxic chemicals. The neighborhood lies within a half-mile of landfills where the military dumped oils, paints and other chemical garbage.

Recently, many of the residents showed up at a town meeting to learn more about the Hodgkin's cases.

Health experts say Hodgkin's has never been linked scientifically to any kind of pollution. Still, epidemiologists say it's rare to see so many cases so close together. The disease typically strikes between two and three people per 100,000. They would expect to see only two cases in the neighborhood during the 23-year period.

Latshaw's mother, Diana, recalls learning before her son died that two of his childhood friends also had the disease. They survived.

"When I found out his other friends had contracted it also, I was very suspicious," she said. "I wondered how that could be."

"They're looking into it, so that's all I want."